



June 15, 2008

New compact for rural America

By Dee Davis

Special to The Courier-Journal

By any measure, rural America is falling further and further behind the rest of the country. Look at the number of children living in poverty, children without health insurance, or per capita spending on schools, and you see that rural communities continue to lag the nation's cities and suburbs. Of America's 250 poorest counties, 244 are rural. Yet these are conditions that news outlets ignore, charitable foundations avoid, and politicians sidestep.

Rural America is more than the land. Sixty million strong -- one fifth of the country -- rural Americans represent a rich diversity of people and possibilities. When rural communities succeed, the nation does better. Cities and suburbs benefit from richer resources and stronger markets when rural economies are healthy. But when rural communities falter, it drains the nation's prosperity and limits what we can accomplish together.

We now face the challenge of sustainably fueling, feeding and nurturing both ourselves and a fragile world. It is one of the defining tests of the 21st Century. And if we are to meet this challenge, the vitality of rural America will be essential.

We have just endured a primary election season that steamed through small towns and villages in every state, yet in the public debate we heard next to nothing about policy or prospects for rural communities outside of obligatory discussions of the farm bill. And the farm bill is, at best, legislation designed for a different era and a different rural reality.

Fewer than 2 percent of rural Americans make their primary living on the farm, making agriculture far more dependent on the rural economy than the rural economy is dependent on agriculture.

A recent poll of rural voters in battleground states showed that their concerns were not that different than those of urban and suburban America. Rural voters worry about the skyrocketing cost of gasoline, because they have to drive farther to get to their jobs. They are pressed by the high cost of health coverage. And they are dismayed by the high cost of war, an issue brought home by the disproportionately high number of rural American deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan.

America needs a real rural policy, one that makes sense for this century -- a policy that is more connected to the current challenges facing people in the nation's cities, suburbs and country places.

Toward that end, hundreds of leaders from rural America have come together to create a different approach to rural policy. It is called the Rural Compact (*RuralCompact.org*). It is an approach that affirms the fundamental connection that the country shares about place and inclusion. It focuses on education, health, stewardship of the land, and investment as opportunities to re-imagine the American trajectory so that rural communities can play their part and make a fair contribution.

We have seen that the absence of a national rural debate and lingering confusion over rural policy has served no one well -- neither the country nor the countryside. Perhaps it is time we

try something different.

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